

*City of Taunton
Office of the Mayor*



Mayor Shaunna O'Connell

State of the City Address

January 27, 2021

Good evening and thank you for joining me as I deliver my first State of the City address.

I would like to start by remembering and offering sincere condolences to all of our friends, neighbors and family members in Taunton who have lost their lives due to covid-19 over the past year. We are grateful to all frontline workers who have served and sacrificed every day to combat the pandemic.

Healthcare professionals and staff at Morton, Taunton State Hospital, and local clinics have braved the battle zone to care for us. Our police and firefighters have done extraordinary work in the face of unprecedented challenge, and heartache.

Thank you all.

It's hard to believe that one year ago, I stood before you to be sworn in as your first woman mayor. Not long after, we were hit with an unprecedented public health crisis.

Over the past 12 months, we have learned that while we cannot control our circumstances and the challenges we face, we can adjust our course to achieve our goals.

No one could have predicted the pandemic that lay ahead of us and the hardship it would bring to our community.

While the challenges have been fierce, we have not been deterred from making a better Taunton for all.

I stand here today humbled by the difficulties we have faced and yet gratified with the knowledge that our city has pulled together like never before. We are ready to turn the corner and embrace a new day for Taunton.

Last March, we learned very quickly that we would need to be adaptable, creative, and steadfast in our handling of the city's well-being to find our way through uncharted territory. There was no guide or precedence to follow. We needed to lead the way.

I made four important goals to guide us. First, keep our city as safe as possible from COVID-19. Second, ensure that our city remained running smoothly and serving you. Third, prepare our city for the future by implementing reforms. And 4th, remain accessible to you.

Working closely with all city departments, and striving for better communication, I committed to utilizing all resources in our local fight against COVID-19 so that we could help our citizens young and old, our schools, our businesses, and of course our city employees who were serving on the frontlines.

I knew that when I stood here before you at the end of my first year as Mayor, I did not want to tell you a story of how we just survived the past year.

I wanted to be able to show you that we did more than survive: We managed to thrive in a new way.

Our team worked on multiple fronts to combat COVID-19 and meet the changing needs of our city residents.

Knowing there would be a great need to assist individuals, non-profits, and local businesses impacted by the shutdown of our state, we created emergency funds and received generous donations from many of you, from (SPELLOUT:) BCSB, TDC, the United Way, and other generous donors. Thank you.

As a result, we have been able to help our friends and neighbors keep food on the table and our businesses keep their doors open.

My office created the COVID-19 Hotline, worked to provide COVID-19 testing, provided PPE to the community, recorded daily video updates, and re-vamped our city website to include the most current COVID-19 information.

We also used social media to share important information, and we found new ways, like our Telephone Town Hall, to engage our citizens in a discussion about COVID-19.

As new vaccines give us hope, I understand that the road ahead still presents many challenges with this terrible pandemic. We will continue to fight the spread of the virus with all our means, our ingenuity, and unwavering determination.

While 2020 was a difficult year, together we have made progress.

I am proud to say that as we look back on 2020, we see that COVID-19 was only one part of our city's story. Despite the numerous challenges and obstacles, we accomplished many things.

During the midst of the pandemic, we moved to our newly renovated City Hall. It was a hallmark moment for our city and an important step forward in our plans for revitalizing downtown. This building is steeped in our rich history, and I have been thrilled to personally take so many residents for a tour.

While we have been laser focused on helping our local businesses that have been devastated by the pandemic, we have also been aggressively reaching out to bring new jobs to Taunton.

I am proud to report that we have been successful. Taunton now has a new Amazon delivery station that has created hundreds of new jobs. American Anchor, Uplifted Nutrition, Creative Baskets, U.B.U. Hair Salon, and Riverhouse Restaurant are just a few more of the new members of the Taunton business family. Other businesses, like Studio 27, Open Doors Yoga Studio, Martignetti and Callico expanded their operations.

We also saw a proliferation of home-based businesses, as people used creative means to provide new products and services to our city residents.

One of our goals coming into office was to make our city government more efficient and less costly. We made progress in aligning our city budget more closely with our expenses and we found creative ways to save money without eliminating services.

Right now, we are in the process of working with our city departments to find new ways to improve upon on the delivery of services. Innovative changes have already been implemented.

The Department of Public Works is leading the way by establishing standard operating procedures and using technology to streamline operations.

At the same time, the DPW is working on millions of dollars in infrastructure projects on Bay St, County St, and the 138 corridor.

We will improve outdoor spaces and recreation with over \$1 million in renovations at Memorial Park, Hopewell Pool, and Flannery Playground.

State and federal funding for our new Airport administration building was in jeopardy when we came in. We worked to save the project, which will open up opportunity to attract business, recreation, and a restaurant.

Recognizing that we need to be bold in changing antiquated systems that hinder progress, we have taken the long awaited step of creating an Elections Office that will efficiently deliver superior service to our residents.

Keeping our promise to be business friendly and foster economic development, we are creating a one-stop permitting center and a fully on-line permitting process.

As we took many steps to increase our efficiency, our productivity, and our accountability as a city, we made sure we did not forget the people who inspired us to do all these things. We continued to engage the community and provide services and support for our children, our veterans, our seniors.

We found creative ways to celebrate our cherished traditions and create new ones. We remembered 9/11, had some Halloween fun, lit up our beautiful Taunton Green, and decorated gingerbread houses together. As COVID-19 battered us with worries and stress, we battled back with unity, hope and faith.

The future, by its very nature, is unknown and uncertain. But our city is poised for success. We have the vision and the perseverance to overcome obstacles and pave new paths.

We are prepared to continue our fight against COVID-19, and we will bring all our resources to bear until the fight is done.

This coming year we will make even greater progress as we forge ahead with our plans to make our city the best it can be.

Our team is working together to take action and deliver solutions that will address longstanding issues and position us for success.

That means updating our city charter, re-establishing the Taunton Redevelopment Authority, creating a procurement office to centralize purchasing power and cut costs, funding our newly created Public Safety Building Capital Improvement Fund, and implementing recommendations of our master plan. We have an ambitious agenda, and these are just a few of our goals.

The closing of the landfill eliminated about \$1.4 million in annual revenue last year and left us looking for alternative ways to dispose of solid waste and biosolids. We are working on a biosolids facility that will create jobs, provide an environmentally friendly solution for disposal, and replace lost revenue from the landfill.

I look forward to the support of the City Council so that we waste no time in building a better tomorrow for our community.

None of these things would be possible without our team of truly dedicated city employees. They strive every day to provide our community with the best possible service and to improve the quality of life for all our residents, and we are grateful for their dedication.

As I have always promised, I am committed to remaining accessible and accountable to you. I love being your mayor, and I give this job 100% every day because I love our community and I know that you are counting on me.

I would like to thank you—our citizens—our city employees, and our city officials for being great partners over the past year. We could not have come out of these dark days without your cooperation and support. I thank you all from the bottom of my heart.

We have learned many lessons over this past year. But the most important lesson we learned is that we, as a community, have the strength to endure, and the capacity to flourish.

To paraphrase Maya Angelou, despite all we have faced this past year, “still, we rise.”

Thank you, and God bless.